

Dr. Harold Fanning Drake, A very dedicated Doctor of Madison County

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

Huntsville had been served by many great leaders who fade away with time and passing generations. Dr. Harold Fanning Drake is one who should never be forgotten. He arrived in Alabama on April 14, 1922, as the only son of Dr. Joseph Drake, the fourth president of A&M College, and Annie G. Drake. Dr. Harold Drake was the first to change the medical scene of Huntsville and open the doors breaking the color barrier at Huntsville Hospital. With his help and bravery, Huntsville moved forward to its future without destruction.

Marrying Geneva Lucretia Nall on April 14, 1945, he continued with his education and graduated from Meharry Medical College in Tennessee in 1946 then served his internship at Harlem Hospital in New York City. He did his residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Mercy-Douglass Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He started his private practice in Madison County in 1948 and administered to patients in Donalson Hospital in Fayetteville, Tennessee. Becoming the first Negro doctor to gain a membership into the Madison County Medical Society working all hours of the day and night having very little time off. To be allowed to join the Society in 1950, the doctors of Huntsville Hospital agreed he could join but only attend the business meeting, not the social or lunch part.

By becoming an accepted member of the Madison County Medical Society, he was given a special arrangement to admit Negro patients to the Colored Wing of Huntsville Hospital. As the first Negro medical doctor on Staff at Huntsville Hospital, he wrote a letter on behalf of Dr. Hereford to be accepted to the Hospital staff with Dr. Drake. Dr. Hereford wrote in his book, *Beside the Troubled Waters*, "As the only two Black Doctors at Huntsville Hospital, we always had to make sure we didn't offend anybody or make

any mistakes.” Dr. Hereford wrote that Dr. Drake was a doctor that people looked up to and admired. Dr. Drake was able to build up white patients into his practice by going to sporting goods stores and hobby stores to meet potential clients.

In 1953, while doing surgery on ten-year-old Tommy Scruggs’ fractured elbow, Dr. Drake and Dr. Robert Bibb was suddenly confronted with a stopped heart. Dr. Drake made an incision into the upper abdomen and rhythmically massaged the child’s heart muscle for five minutes. A week later the child walked out the hospital on his way home. Ebony ran a two-page article, “The Dead Boy Who Came Back To Life,” in the February 1953 magazine.

In 1946, nurse Johnnie LouJean Dent was the first Negro nurse hired by the Madison County Health Department to improve the training of local midwives. She and Dr. Harold F. Drake organized the Triana Maternity and Child Health Clinic in 1950 to provide health care for expectant Negro mothers and children, many of whom, until then, did not have access to health care. He worked there up until the 1970s. He was the only medical doctor helping young women who found themselves with unwanted pregnancies during the late 60s. He experienced being arrested several times for performing abortions even though charges were always dropped against him. He experienced a sadden incident of a young woman dying during the procedure.

Dr. Drake was involved with many aspects of Huntsville serving as the school physician at Oakwood College and A&M University. He became a medical officer at the US Army Troop Health Clinic. He was a member of the Staff of Family Practice of Huntsville Hospital. He spent many years working at the Huntsville Hospital Emergency Room. He served as Medical Advisor for the Family Planning, Head Start, and Comprehensive Childcare Program of the Community Action Agency of Huntsville-Madison County, Inc. He also looked after patients in the NHE Nursing Home, Madison Manor in Madison, Big Spring Manor and the Huntsville Nursing Home. Dr. Drake was integral part of the healthy growth of Huntsville and Madison, AL.

Dr. Harold Drake continued to break the colored barrier but without negative attention to himself. Lawrence Goldsmith, the owner of the Russell Erskine Hotel, invited Dr. Drake to integrate the hotel smoothly providing an example for the rest of the town to follow. Dr. Drake and Dr. Cashin integrated the new municipal golf course and Huntsville Public Library. In 1964, Dr. Drake ran for City Council but did not win. His run helped expand the registered black voters and bring about more change.

He stayed very involved with the community through serving at a deacon of the Church Street Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, member of the Delta Theta Lambda Chapter, and a member of the Evening Star Lodge No. 6. He received many service awards and plaques for his civic work. He was given a "This is Your Life" tribute at the Loveman's Mall. He was a member and involved with many civic community and national organizations.

Dr. Drake when he had the time enjoyed golf, tennis, dancing, music, and played several instruments. He enjoyed model airplane building and was a member of the Rocket City Radio Controllers Model Airplane Club. Being a diabetic he knew the importance of exercise and rode his bike daily. On October 2, 1979, he was riding his bike on Alabama Highway 53 north and collided with a pickup truck. The accident triggered a heart attack and along with his other injuries, he passed away on November 3, 1979. A Harold Drake Memorial Fund was established at Huntsville Hospital Foundation after his death. He was a doctor that people looked up to and admired. Dr. Drake dedicated his life to the health of Madison County.



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